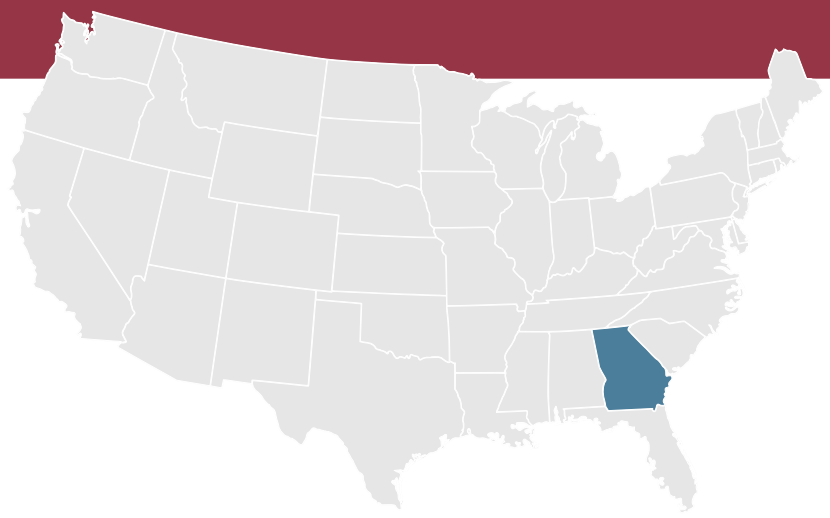


# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



## Georgia

### *Project Overview*

**B**ellwether Education Partners, in partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, convened an objective, independent panel of accountability experts to review ESSA state plans. We sought out a diverse group of peer reviewers with a range of political viewpoints and backgrounds, and we asked them to review each state's accountability plan with an eye toward capturing strengths and weaknesses.

We aimed to provide constructive feedback to the states, and to serve as a source of straightforward information to the public so that they are better able to engage policymakers if and how they see fit. Inherently, this independent process could not take into account the numerous political and situational challenges that occur in every state. We are in no way attempting to diminish those challenges, but the scope of this review was to compare the rigor and comprehensive nature of state accountability plans.

Peers worked in small teams to review the plans that states formally submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. After reviewing independently, the peers met for two days to discuss their individual reviews and work together on the collaborative draft you'll see below. The teams were asked to use their discretion and expertise to respond to and score each rubric item, and those scores were normed across states and peers.

Each state was given the opportunity to review the draft peer analysis and to provide substantive additions and corrections. Still, the reviews should be considered a snapshot of state plans as of September–November 2017, and we anticipate that states will continue to update their plans going forward.

To read more about the project, as well as a list of the expert peer reviewers, visit the Bellwether website [here](#).

## Overall Strengths and Weaknesses

**Strengths:** What are the most promising aspects of the state’s plan? What parts are worth emulating by other states?

Georgia has laid out a clear vision for school improvement. The state places significant emphasis on both academic achievement and growth, and it selected a straightforward set of indicators that focus on college and career readiness. The state deserves credit for including an indicator of gap closure; however, its assigned weight and how individual subgroups are combined to calculate the measure could be improved.

Georgia also detailed a promising vision for tiered school support and turn-around efforts and should be commended for considering how to provide additional support to schools that are at risk of identification, recently exited identified status, or have broadly missed their goals.

**Weaknesses:** What are the most pressing areas for the state to improve in its plan? What aspects should other states avoid?

Georgia’s accountability system does not convey the necessary sense of urgency to raise the achievement of the students who are the furthest behind. The goals are one example of this, as is the achievement index, which runs the risk of masking outcomes of students who are not yet proficient. While it is positive that the state included a growth measure in its accountability system, the way Georgia will be incorporating the measure will make it difficult to know if students are on track to graduate ready for college and careers.

Moreover, the vast majority of a school’s rating is based on overall results, which can mask large disparities in student outcomes. While the state deserves credit for including a specific weighting of each school’s rating devoted to subgroups, that rating is relatively small at 15 percent of a school’s overall grade. Additionally, Georgia’s plan for identifying schools with low-performing subgroups communicates lower expectations for historically underserved student groups.

Georgia’s plan would be also improved by providing more specific detail about the roles for the state and its districts in supporting struggling schools. The state’s plan offers only limited information about how it intends to support these schools, nor does it include timelines, processes to engage with stakeholders, detailed interventions, a school improvement funding strategy, or how it will ensure that its efforts produce the necessary improvements for identified schools.

# Plan Components

Each state’s plan has been rated on a scale of 1 (“This practice should be avoided by other states”) to 5 (“This could be a potential model for other states”).

**Goals:** Are the state’s vision, goals, and interim targets aligned, ambitious, and attainable? Why or why not?



Georgia’s goal is to reduce the percentage of non-proficient or non-graduating students by 3 percent annually. This goal structure requires that schools and subgroups who are further behind make greater progress than those who are more advanced. But absent historical data, there is a concern that Georgia’s goals are too low to ensure that all students, particularly those who have been historically underserved, are prepared for college and career.

Setting aside the concern that the goals may not be sufficiently ambitious, Georgia deserves credit for incorporating them into their accountability system. The state’s “Closing Gaps” measure is based on the performance against their goals of all students and each subgroup of students. Additionally, schools will receive green, yellow, or red flags for each subgroup depending on their performance against these targets. This approach may be a useful way to signal to parents how students, schools, and districts are performing.

Georgia’s English long-term proficiency goal is for English learners to reach proficiency on the ACCESS 2.0 assessment within a maximum of seven years, which is at the high end of research-based best practices. The timeframe students have to reach that level depends on their initial performance level. The proficiency bar on ACCESS is also set lower than in other WIDA states. Students who begin with a higher performance level are expected to reach English proficiency more quickly. The state’s annual target, as with achievement and graduation, is to decrease by 3 percent the gap between the percentage of students improving at least one performance band and 100 percent.

**Standards and Assessments:** Is the state’s accountability system built on high-quality standards and assessments aligned to college and career readiness? Why or why not?



Georgia uses the Georgia Standards of Excellence, which are based on Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English language arts. The state also has science and social studies standards.

According to Georgia’s ESSA plan, the state is pursuing “maximum flexibility” when it comes to assessment. This includes allowing districts to select a nationally recognized high school assessment in place of the state test, as well as possibly applying for a pilot program to offer innovative assessments. Even though the plan says that the state will honor the comparability and technical requirements in ESSA, it does not specify how it will do so.

It is positive that the state will adjust a school’s academic performance score if it does not meet the 95 percent participation rate on state assessments. However, the plan would be stronger if it included consequences for schools that miss the 95 percent participation threshold, overall or for particular subgroups. Such a provision would help preserve the integrity of the state’s accountability system and ensure that all students are represented equitably.

Despite a significant Spanish-speaking English learner population, Georgia will only administer assessments in English due to state law. The state’s plan would be improved if it described with greater detail how it will support English learners and ensure they can be successful on the state assessments.

Georgia could also strengthen its plan by providing the steps it will take to ensure that it does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the state’s alternative assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Additionally, the state could strengthen its plan by providing more information about its alternative achievement standards and aligned assessments for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities.

**Indicators:** Are the state’s chosen accountability indicators aligned to ensure targets and goals are met and likely to lead to improved educational outcomes for students? Why or why not?



Georgia’s selected indicators cover a range of important aspects of school performance and quality. The measures are organized by grade span and cover five different components: content mastery, progress, closing gaps, readiness, and graduation rates. Every school is accountable for achievement on the statewide assessment system in mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies.

The state’s “readiness” indicator is promising and comprises a number of useful sub-indicators. The state could improve its plan by explaining more clearly how those individual indicators fit together to construct the overall readiness measure.

However, on most indicators, results of individual groups of students are not taken into account at all. The Gap Closing indicator does look at whether schools are making progress toward goals on state assessment, but a) those goals are not ambitious, and b) the indicator carries little weight (only 10 to 15 percent).

**Academic Progress:** Has the state created sufficient incentives for schools to care about both student proficiency and student growth over time? Why or why not?

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Georgia should be commended for placing a significant emphasis on academic progress. It will weight progress in elementary and middle schools at 35 percent, which is greater weight than the content mastery indicator at 30 percent. This creates a strong incentive for schools to focus on both growth and proficiency. However, the state’s way of measuring proficiency and growth may not be strong enough to ensure that all students get the content they need to reach college/career-ready standards.

At the high school level, progress and content mastery are weighted equally at 30 percent each. But since the state’s content mastery measure comprises four subjects, achievement in any one subject (such as English or math) accounts for just 7.5 percent of a school’s rating.

The state’s achievement measure will award points to schools based on student performance across multiple levels of performance. Rather than grading schools by a percentage of students reaching proficiency, Georgia will award points ranging from 0 to 1.5 based on students’ achievement level: 0 points for beginning learners, 0.5 points for developing learners, 1 point for proficient learners, and 1.5 points for distinguished learners.

While Georgia deserves credit for seeking to reward performance at different levels, the system as proposed does not give any extra emphasis on students reaching grade-level standards, and it appears to give disproportionate weight to the advanced level. Consider two schools, one where half of its students score “developing” and the other score “advanced,” and another school in which all students score “proficient.” Under Georgia’s rating system, both schools would receive exactly the same amount of points despite very different performance distributions. While tracking the progress of advanced students is important, doing so cannot mask the students who are not yet proficient in the same classroom or school. It is unclear what would be illuminated and what would be hidden in schools using this approach. This weighting issue appears in other indicators as well.

Georgia’s academic progress measure applies to English language arts and mathematics and is measured by student growth percentiles (SGP). This approach compares the progress students make against their similarly performing peers and converts those scores into percentiles. While this approach is relatively simple to calculate and interpret, it does not ensure students cover the content they need to master to stay on track toward mastery at graduation. This issue is of particular concern given that the state’s chosen achievement measure also does not focus on students reaching grade-level expectations.

Georgia will convert each student’s percentile scores into its accountability system through a set of performance bands. For example, students scoring at the first through 29th percentile earn 0 points, the 30th through 40th percentile earn 0.5 points, and students earn full credit for reaching the 41st percentile (that is, students earn

full credit even for making below-average growth). This is a low bar, and it's especially concerning given that the calculation does not take into account whether or not a student is making adequate growth to become proficient or advanced, or to remain at those levels over time.

The state also includes progress toward English language proficiency (ELP) in its progress indicator. Schools are awarded points for students meeting different performance levels. Students making no progress toward proficiency earn 0 points, those making progress but not moving performance bands earn 0.5 points, and those moving one band earn 1 point. A student is awarded 1.5 points for moving greater than one band. The bands are "wider" at lower levels of English proficiency, which is consistent with research that says that students make faster progress when they are first starting to learn English compared to when they are reaching English proficiency. However, this indicator only accounts for 3.5 percent of a school's score. Given its relatively large English learner population, Georgia may want to consider increasing that weight.

**All Students:** Does the state system mask the performance of some subgroups of students, or does it have adequate checks in place to ensure all students (including all subgroups of students) receive a high-quality education? Why or why not?



Georgia plans to include the results of student groups through its "Closing Gaps" indicator, which measures the percentage of achievement targets met among all students and all subgroups of students. The measure will account for 15 percent of a school's overall score in elementary and middle schools, and 10 percent in high schools. Georgia also plans to "flag" schools based on whether or not they meet their improvement targets for all students and for each individual student group. However, Georgia has not clearly articulated how the performance of individual subgroups will be combined into a school's score on the closing gaps indicator. In other words, will each qualifying subgroup earn equal weight, or will it depend on their relative size?

The plan also does not meaningfully capture outcomes for English learners. The measure of progress towards English language proficiency is just one component of the "Progress" indicator and counts for no more than 3.5 percent of a school's overall score. In addition, the state does not specify how long it will include former English learners in the English learner subgroup.

The state does deserve credit for selecting a small minimum group size (of 15 students) to determine if schools should be held accountable for the performance of subgroups. The plan goes into some detail about why it chose that number and how many more schools and subgroups are included, as compared to a higher threshold of 20 students.

**Identifying Schools:** Is the state’s plan to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support likely to identify the schools and student groups most in need?

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Georgia’s plan meets the minimal federal guidelines for identifying the lowest-performing schools, but its plan to identify schools with low-performing subgroups may set a low bar. The state will identify for comprehensive support the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools ranked according to their three-year average, as well as schools that have a graduation rate less than or equal to 67 percent, and schools that did not exit the additional targeted support designation within three years.

To identify schools with low-performing subgroups of students, Georgia requires two criteria be met. One, a school must have one or more subgroups who failed to make progress toward meeting their achievement targets or their four-year graduation rate targets for two consecutive years. And two, the subgroup has to fall into the bottom 5 percent of all schools based on that group’s performance on that same indicator. Absent additional data or estimates of their impact, there’s a concern that these criteria set a low bar for identification.

The state deserves credit for some useful steps on transparency. It will rate all schools on a 100-point scale and use a color-coded system to “flag” schools based on their performance for achievement and graduation rates. Schools that meet their targets will receive a green flag, those that make progress but not enough to reach their goal will be marked with a yellow flag, and schools that do not make progress will earn a red flag. Those flags do not appear to carry any consequences, however.

**Supporting Schools:** Are the state’s planned interventions in comprehensive and targeted support schools evidence-based and sufficiently rigorous to match the challenges those schools face? Why or why not?

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The state has a tiered system of supports available to schools once they have reached different levels of identification. Tier I supports are available to all schools and include various types of self-assessment tools and information on best practices. Tier II supports are meant for targeted support schools and include eligibility for school improvement funding, support from Regional Education Service Agencies, and additional professional learning opportunities. Tier III supports are for comprehensive support schools and include all of the above plus additional monitoring from the state department of education (including a comprehensive school review). Tier IV supports are the most intensive and are reserved for turnaround schools. These include a school review by a state turnaround team, but the plan could provide more information about what it considers as evidence-based interventions and the timelines and steps that will be taken to turn around struggling schools.

To lead the state's effort to turn around the lowest-performing schools in the state, Georgia established a new position at the state department of education, the Chief Turnaround Officer. The Chief Turnaround Officer manages the system of supports and helps to facilitate assistance to the lowest-performing schools in the state. The improvement activities also include contracting with a third party for a comprehensive on-site review, conducting a root cause analysis, and developing an intensive improvement plan in collaboration with key stakeholders.

While the tiers of support provide a promising structure, the effectiveness and rigor of the support will depend on the quality of the tools, resources, and capacity of the individuals involved. However, the plan itself notes that the state department has a history and culture of focusing on compliance, not support. A shift to a culture of support and service is entirely correct, and all stakeholders are wise to monitor how the department is prepared to staff and execute against this vision.

At this time, it's difficult to say whether the supports are sufficiently rigorous to turn around chronically low-performing schools. The plan could be improved by making clear how the state plans to distribute its Title I funds dedicated to school improvement. Additionally, Georgia should indicate if and how it intends to provide direct student services using the optional 3 percent set-aside, which provides an additional opportunity for the state to align school improvement activities with its statewide goals.

**Exiting Improvement Status:** Are the state's criteria for schools to exit comprehensive and targeted support status sufficient to demonstrate sustained improvements? Why or why not?

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Georgia clearly articulates exit criteria for both comprehensive and targeted support schools, but those may not be sufficient to demonstrate real, sustained progress. Because the identification bar is so low, schools may exit support even when a significant number of their students are still underserved and not on track.

Schools may exit comprehensive support status when they no longer fall in the bottom 5 percent of schools, and when they demonstrate an improvement in the overall accountability score greater than a 3 percent reduction in the gap between the baseline index score and 100. The baseline index score is the highest score in the three-year average that resulted in the school being identified. Exit criteria will be run yearly, meaning schools are eligible to exit every year. Schools identified for low graduation rates can exit when the graduation rate exceeds 67 percent. These identification criteria appear to set low standards for schools, and they could result in the same groups of schools falling in and out of identification.



Schools can exit targeted support status when they no longer meet identification criteria and make any progress at all for the group and content area (reading proficiency, math proficiency, or graduation rates) that led to the school's original identification. This is a low bar, since a school can make any level of progress, even just one point, and it is considered satisfactory. Georgia should consider a more ambitious level of progress for schools to exit this status.

**Continuous Improvement:** Has the state outlined a clear plan to learn from its implementation efforts and modify its actions accordingly, including through continued consultation and engagement of key stakeholders? If not, what steps could the state take to do so?



Georgia plans to establish new partnerships, and to strengthen existing ones, with other state agencies to increase focus and develop new initiatives to serve communities and provide wraparound services to students. This is a promising idea, but Georgia should provide more details about which agencies it plans to partner with, what initiatives it plans to pursue, and how it will monitor and improve those efforts.

Georgia's ESSA plan explicitly references its State Systemic Improvement Plan under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This plan focuses on increasing graduation rates for students with disabilities. Including it in the state's ESSA plan demonstrates a commitment to educating all students, and to integrating and aligning state improvement efforts.

The state also emphasizes the need to work with stakeholders to support school improvement, rightly pointing out that community members are essential partners. Georgia has also shown a commitment to working with diverse community stakeholders. For example, it organized a "Solutions Summit" with equal participation from business, education, community, and policy leaders. To help craft its plan, the state engaged with an "ESSA Advisory Committee," and it has committed to reconvene this group as it turns toward implementation.